LIFE OF GALILEO

Bertolt Brecht

Insight Text Article by Sue Sherman

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Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht was born in Germany on the cusp of the 20th century. He was a rebel from an early age, risking expulsion from school for writing an essay which failed to display ‘proper’ patriotic sentiments, in a country where nationalism was becoming almost obligatory. As a young man, Brecht mixed in theatrical circles with creative and freethinking people. After abandoning his medical studies, he wrote his first plays: *Baal* and *In the Jungle of Cities*, the latter being produced in Munich and Leipzig in 1923, just as the activities of Hitler’s National Socialists had begun to cause a stir. Predictably, the rebellious young playwright and the increasingly powerful and repressive Nazi Party were soon to come into conflict.

In 1927, Brecht’s collaboration with composer Kurt Weill produced *The Threepenny Opera*, based on *The Beggar’s Opera* (originally produced in 1728). Brecht, however, added his own lyrics to proclaim his growing belief in Marxism. He also attempted to develop a new approach to drama, wanting the audience to see the stage as a stage and the actors as actors, rather than entering into the imagined world of the play. Brecht’s radical purpose was not to elicit audience involvement with the characters as ‘people’ but to facilitate the communication of his Marxist ideas and provoke the audience into reflecting on the ideas being presented.

With his overtly Marxist sympathies, Brecht quickly came to the attention of the Nazis, who strongly denounced his work. When the Nazi Party came to power in 1933, Brecht and his family fled first to Prague and finally to Denmark. In 1935 he was stripped of his German citizenship. While living in exile he wrote anti-Nazi plays such as *Fear and Misery of the...*
Third Reich. This was followed by Life of Galileo (1939), The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui (1941) – a thinly disguised attack on Hitler – and The Caucasian Chalk Circle (1943). In 1941, Brecht settled in America, made contact with other political exiles and established connections in the film industry.

In 1947, in an atmosphere of anti-Communist hysteria, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began an investigation into the politics of the entertainment industry. The HUAC interviewed 41 cooperative Hollywood insiders who named 19 of their colleagues as holding left-wing views. Brecht was one of those named and, after denying that he was a member of the American Communist Party, he left America for East Germany.

Interesting parallels exist between Bertolt Brecht and Galileo Galilei in that both men believed in a ‘truth’ which brought them into conflict with governments that needed to suppress political dissidents in order to maintain power. Both men were reproached for moral compromise; however, their survival ensured the completion of their important and influential work.

Encountering Conflict in Life of Galileo

The conflicts in Life of Galileo are personal, political and moral. These tensions in the play are inextricably linked and are embodied in the character of the protagonist, whose private and public encounters with conflict have widespread ramifications.

Personal and domestic conflicts arise because of Galileo’s precarious financial position. His salary from the university in Padua is pitifully inadequate and he worries about the bailiffs and Virginia’s dowry. Mrs Sarti, his housekeeper, constantly pressures him to take private students ‘to pay the milkman’ (p.10). A simple-minded religious woman, Mrs Sarti is deeply troubled by Galileo’s theories and by the keen interest shown by her son Andrea.
She worries about Andrea ‘slipping into sin’ (p.78) through his involvement with Galileo’s research. Galileo and his daughter Virginia’s fiancé Ludovico find themselves in conflict over Galileo’s continued research and his defiance of the Church’s orders. As a result, Ludovico breaks off the engagement, provoking the anger of Mrs Sarti who accuses Galileo of ‘tramp[ling] all over [his] daughter’s happiness’ (p.78).

Galileo’s increasingly dangerous encounter with political conflict is intensified by the invention of the telescope which suddenly provides scientific ‘proof’ (p.27) that the earth revolves around the sun. Galileo naively believes that this will silence the critics in Florence who hold fast to the Ptolemaic theory that the earth is the centre of the universe; he ignores the advice of his friend, Sagredo, who warns him that going to Florence armed with ‘the truth’ is ‘going to his doom’ (p.33).

The political conflict that engulfs Galileo in Florence arises from the Church’s need to discredit Copernican theories that ‘[get] rid of heaven’ (p.24), even if these theories are correct. The Inquisition (the Church tribunal) has executed heretics such as Giordano Bruno for promulgating a heliocentric ‘heresy’ that would ‘shake men’s faith in the Church’ (p.61). The Inquisition was the Church’s response to encountering conflict; if the accused confessed, the judges prescribed minor punishments like flogging, while denial of the charges and persistence in the heresy resulted in the most severe punishments: life imprisonment or execution accompanied by total confiscation of property. The sentenced heretic was handed over to the secular authorities for execution, usually by burning at the stake. It is little wonder, therefore, that many people abandoned their moral principles and confessed.

Political conflict with the Church is at the centre of Galileo’s moral conflict. His passion for scientific truth is at the core of his moral values and he believes his duty as a scientist is to eradicate ignorance and reveal the truth; however, shown the ‘instruments of torture’ (p.65), Galileo quickly
recants, solely for reasons of self-preservation. Galileo’s capacity for moral compromise has, however, already been established by his willingness to sell ‘another man’s telescope’ (p.106). Thus the degree of moral conflict involved in Galileo’s decision might have been minimal. Yet the damage to his reputation and his self-acknowledged moral cowardice become a source of intense inner conflict.

Galileo’s recantation leads to what is perhaps the most distressing personal conflict in the play: that between Galileo and his former protégé Andrea, who has become ‘his enemy’ (p.102). Galileo’s secret work on his Discorsi changes Andrea’s mind about Galileo’s moral integrity: ‘You gained the leisure to write a scientific work which could be written by nobody else’ (p.106). Galileo quickly sets him straight: he recanted ‘because [he] was afraid of physical pain’ (p.107) and he shamefully ‘betrayed [his] profession’ (p.109). Galileo’s self-abasement here does him credit and shows how deeply his encounter with conflict has affected him. His optimistic belief in the power of science ‘to lighten the burden of human existence’ (p.108) has been replaced by a bitter and cynical view of scientists as ‘a race of inventive dwarfs who can be hired for any purpose’ (p.109). As with all serious conflict, the effects are always damaging and nobody escapes unscathed.

**Conflict between science and religion**

At the core of conflict in Brecht’s play is the confrontation between science and religion. Science (from Latin *scientia*, meaning ‘knowledge’) is a systematic enterprise that builds and organises knowledge in the form of testable explanations and predictions about the universe. Religion, on the other hand, can be defined as a collection of cultural systems, belief systems, and world views that relate humanity to spirituality and, sometimes, to moral value. Many religions have narratives that are intended to give meaning to life or to explain the origin of life or the universe. The potential for opposition between science and religion is
immediately clear, particularly in regard to their respective positions on the creation of the universe. The conflict is a philosophical one and acceptance of one position will seem to nullify the other – thus the stakes are high.

As a dedicated scientist, Galileo values scientific knowledge above religious faith; logically, he can no longer accept the theory of Aristotle’s ‘crystal spheres’ (p.6). He rejoices in the ‘new time’ when humanity will finally be able to ‘understand its abode’ and is convinced that ‘where faith has been enthroned for a thousand years doubt now sits’ (p.7). Sagredo, however, is not convinced that the ‘lure of a proof’ (p.29) offered by the telescope will alter people’s beliefs because they are simply ‘not open to reason’ (p.29).

Sagredo’s opinion is soon confirmed by the visiting Philosopher who informs Galileo that if his tube (telescope) ‘shows something which cannot be there, it cannot be an entirely reliable tube’ (p.39). The Philosopher and the Mathematician in Florence refuse to look through the telescope at the scientific evidence, clinging resolutely to their faith in ‘the divine Aristotle’ (p.39). In Rome, religious faith is even more deeply entrenched. Despite Galileo’s small victory where reason seems to have ‘won’ (p.54), the Church’s response to proof is pre-empted by the words of The First Scholar at the Collegium Romanum: ‘Dig your heels in and resist’ (p.51). Thus the Church is able to dismiss the scientifically proven doctrine of Copernicus as ‘absurd, heretical and contrary to our faith’ (p.60).

Like religious faith, superstition can also be an obstacle to scientific knowledge as there are people who will always be content to be kept ‘in a pearly haze of superstition’ (p.108). The difference between astrology and astronomy highlights the divide between superstition and science. Virginia and Mrs Sarti exemplify the faith of uneducated people in ‘the stars’ to cast their ‘horoscopes’ and foretell the future (p.71), while Galileo and Andrea’s interest in the stars will unlock the secrets of the universe. While Galileo is ultimately defeated by the triumph of faith and superstition over
knowledge and reason, Andrea’s escape to Reformation Holland with the
*Discorsi* is a step towards resolving the conflict in favour of science.

**Discussion questions**

- Do the world views of science and religion always have to be in conflict? Why or why not?

- In what ways (if any) do you see religion and science as being in conflict in the 21st century? To what extent can these conflicts be seen as between individuals, as well as between competing values and philosophies?

**Conflict between the individual and the state**

The confrontation between science and religion in *Life of Galileo* encompasses the conflict between the individual and the state (the state, in this case, being synonymous with the Church). Lined up on opposing sides are the supremely powerful Catholic Church and the naively confident scientist. It is an unequal contest from the start; Galileo, armed with his telescope and his belief in ‘the seduction of proof’ (p.32), is no match for the omnipotence of Rome, whose biblical scholars refuse to disrupt the Aristotelian ‘harmony’ of the universe (p.39).

As Church scholars – even sympathetic ones such as The Little Monk – are aware, resolving the conflict in favour of scientific truth will create social upheaval. The traditional Ptolemaic system, which makes ‘earth the centre of the universe’ (p.66), underpins the scriptures and preserves social stability. The Little Monk fears the collapse of the established social order if the earth were shown to be merely ‘a small knob of stone twisting endlessly through the void round a second-rate star’ (p.65). He explains that ordinary people, who put their faith in the scriptures, would feel ‘betrayed and deceived’ (p.66). The Little Monk becomes enmeshed in the conflict when he is unable to reconcile the church’s decree upholding a Ptolemaic universe with the moons of Jupiter which he has observed.
through the telescope; he resolves his conflict by giving up astronomy. His
decision suggests the powerlessness of ordinary individuals against the
unassailable might of church and state.

Galileo, however, is not just an ordinary individual; he is ‘the greatest
physicist’ of the age (p.93) who believes that the truth should be forced
through by people ‘who are prepared to reason’ (p.68). Yet the Church’s
response to Giordano Bruno (a man of ‘reason’ who was burned at the
stake for heresy) shows how easily the ‘truth’ can be manipulated by those
in power. According to biblical scholars, ‘truth’ is found only in the
scriptures and, as it is the Church theologians who interpret the scriptures,
there is little chance of challenging doctrinal ‘truths’ and thereby
destabilising society. The Catholic Church is at the pinnacle of the social
hierarchy in Renaissance Italy, but cannot maintain this position without
God and Heaven. Cardinal Barbarini’s joke, that ‘If God didn’t exist, we
should have to invent him’ (p.61), is more true than amusing.

Given the Church’s need for God’s existence, monks and astronomers
at the Collegium Romanum wonder how Christopher Clavius can ‘stoop to
examine [Galileo’s] proposition’ (p.52). What Clavius observes
encapsulates the conflict between religious faith and scientific reason; he is
clearly troubled by his knowledge that Galileo is ‘right’ (p.54). This moment
is a turning point where the power of the Church might hang in the balance
and, in admitting to the truth of Copernicus’ theories, the state also
suppresses them by insisting that they are treated mathematically, ‘in the
form of a hypothesis’ (p.60). Thus Brecht shows that when the freedom of
the individual to expose fallacy and reveal the truth is denied, the ensuing
conflict will always be resolved in favour of the state.

In the light of Galileo’s continued resistance, the Church finally
resorts to brute force to make him ‘[toe] the line’ (p.103) by showing him
the ‘instruments of torture’ (p.65). Such terrifying demonstrations of
political power are shown to be highly effective in resolving conflict (albeit
temporarily) in favour of the interests of the state. The suppression of the individual ‘who knows the truth’ (p.33) is deemed necessary to keep the earth at ‘the centre of the universe’ and Rome at ‘the centre of the earth’ (p.66). In suppressing Galileo, the Church of Rome is also responding to a broader political conflict. At the very time when the ‘wretched’ mathematicians ‘point their tubes at the sky’, a gathering of ... representatives of every order and the entire clergy, all with their naive faith in the word of God as set down in the scriptures ... are now assembling here [in Rome] to have that trust confirmed ... (p.91)

The Inquisitor warns the Pope that a ‘terrible restlessness’ has descended on the world and Christianity is being ‘shrivelled into little enclaves by plague, war and the Reformation’ (p.91). Consequently, the dissenting individual, especially one as powerful as Galileo, must be firmly and quickly ‘brought to heel’ (p.108).

Discussion questions

• The state justifies its suppression of nonconformist individuals by the need for social harmony. Is social harmony more important than individual freedom?

• Do scientists have a greater responsibility to science than they do to society?

• Will the interests of the powerful always prevail in encounters with conflict?

• Does silencing those who challenge authority ever resolve conflict?

Conflict with the self

As the title of the play suggests, the play centres on, and tells part of the story of, Galileo’s life. When his safety is threatened by the Inquisition, he
is prepared to compromise his moral integrity, settling for an ‘easy life’ rather than a heroic death (p.67). Galileo’s moral integrity, however, is dubious from early in the play. As Andrea reminds him, Galileo ‘sold another man’s telescope to the Venetian Senate’ and claimed that ‘People who suffer are boring’ (p.106). He also enjoys ‘the consolations of the flesh’ (p.76), being guilty of both lechery (p.31) and gluttony (p.109), two of the seven ‘deadly sins’.

Yet Galileo’s own declaration that someone who knows the truth and calls it a lie ‘is a crook’ (p.70) ultimately returns to haunt him; there are ethical issues which perturb him greatly although these are more concerned with scientific than moral integrity. This shows him to be a man of contradictions who cannot be too easily dismissed as a coward and a traitor. While the instruments of torture terrify him, it is not simply death that Galileo fears but lingering and painful death; indeed, he has already shown himself willing to risk death by remaining in Padua during the plague to continue his research. His recantation, however, looks like cowardice.

After his release by the Inquisition, Galileo is ‘so completely changed by his trial as to be almost unrecognisable’ (p.98). As a highly sensual man, Galileo’s physical ordeal has clearly had a profound effect on him. His inner conflict is less visible but clearly manifested in the self-abasing comments he makes in his later conversation with Andrea. Andrea unequivocally condemns his former mentor, not only for his recantation but also because ‘not a single paper expounding new theories has been published in Italy since [Galileo] toed the line’ (p.103). Galileo’s inner conflict is evident in his regret for the ‘error’ into which he led his ‘scientific friends’ (p.103). His secret transcription of the Discorsi and the exhausting effort and inherent danger of this enterprise indicate the extent of Galileo’s inner conflict and his need to atone for his action. He also exhibits a degree of moral integrity in his refusal to lie, insisting that it was cowardice rather than the opportunity to complete his work that made him recant. Galileo remains a
prisoner until his death, not only literally confined to his house, but also figuratively imprisoned by his conscience.

Conflict with the self is also evident – but more easily resolved – in other characters. The Little Monk is ‘unable to sleep for three days’ after recognising the potential dangers for humanity in ‘wholly unrestricted research’ (p.64). He rationalises – and partly justifies – the Church’s stance because suppressing the truth will ensure ‘the peace of mind of the less fortunate’ (p.67), and his troubled conscience is eased by his belief that eventually ‘the truth will get through’ (p.68).

The Pope (the former Cardinal Barberini) worries over the use of Galileo’s star charts which can save shipping ‘several million scudi’ (p.25), but which are based on ‘heretical theories’ (p.93). Nevertheless, his capacity for moral compromise will allow him to ‘condemn the doctrine and accept the charts’ (p.93). The robing of the Pope in his full ceremonial costume during this scene symbolises his perceived infallibility (the belief that he speaks the word of God) when he rules on matters of doctrine.

Brecht’s characters demonstrate how easily inner conflict can be avoided when the individual evades moral responsibility by submitting to a higher authority, or when self-interest is paramount. Yet these encounters with inner conflict also show that moral compromise will sometimes create deeper inner tensions which are not so easily dismissed.

**Discussion questions**

- Are we more likely to encounter conflict when pursuing causes about which we are passionate?

- Can scientific integrity ever be divorced from moral integrity?

- Every individual has a breaking point; we cannot criticise those who succumb to pressure. Do you agree?
There are times in everyone’s lives where compromise is the only option. Do you agree?

**Conflict within the community**

In Brecht’s play, the conflict between religion and science spills over into the community – mainly the Church and the scientific communities. The Church closes ranks to protect itself against the conflict with science which threatens its power, and uses the most formidable of its weapons: the Inquisition. Early in the play the Procurator warns Galileo not to mention, even in Padua, the name of ‘the man they burned’ because it is subject to the ‘express anathema of the church’ (p.15). The monks and astronomers assembled at the Collegium Romanum reveal their concern about Copernicus’ heliocentric theories. The Second Astronomer asks anxiously whether ‘we must question the eternity and immutability of the heavens’ (p.51) and the Very Thin Monk is angered by the degradation of ‘humanity’s dwelling place to a wandering star’ (p.52).

Despite its being banned, news of ‘Galileo’s doctrine’ spreads (p.82) and its effects are felt all over Italy. The increasingly influential business community values Galileo’s potential benefit to manufacturing. Vanni, a successful manufacturer, admires Galileo’s battle for ‘freedom to teach what’s new’ (p.87) and hopes for ‘a book on the Dutch canals’ which might prove useful to agriculture. Vanni is caught up in the conflict because he knows that he will ‘sink or swim’ (p.87) with people like Galileo. While the dissemination of Galileo’s ideas does not cause great community conflict, it increases the danger of Galileo’s position: Vanni warns him that he’s being blamed for the ‘pamphlets against the bible that have been selling all over the place’ (p.87).

The songs of the common people playfully suggest the potential for social upheaval inherent in the Copernican restructuring of the universe:
The serf stays sitting on his arse.
This turning’s turned his head.
The altar boy won’t serve the mass
The apprentice lies in bed.

(p.83)

Yet Galileo’s ideas are cause for both celebration and concern. In the words of a Ballad Singer:

No, no, no, no, no, no! Stop, Galileo, stop.
Once take a mad dog’s muzzle off it spreads diseases
People must keep their place, some down and some on top.
(Although it’s nice for once to do just as one pleases).

(p.84)

These ballads suggest the freedom and the dangers that accompany radical change, and show that overturning the social order can be a source of both community conflict and individual anxiety.

Understandably, the wealthy landowners experience a greater sense of unease about possible social change. Ludovico expresses the contemptuous views of the landowners towards Galileo’s ‘earth-round-the sun business’ (p.77), uncomfortably aware that it might ‘stir up his peasants to think new thoughts’ (p.79). Ludovico’s mother, however, has methods remarkably similar to those of the Inquisition in confronting conflict, and similar reasons: when the peasants ‘come up to the house with some minor complaint or other, [his] mother is forced to have a dog whipped before their eyes, as the only way to recall them to discipline and order and a proper respect’ (p.79).

The community tensions emanating from the conflict between Galileo and the Church show the ‘ripple effect’ of major conflict on the lives
of ordinary people. This makes for what might be called ‘troubled times’, where ordinary people can feel unsettled and yearn for a return to the social stability of bygone days. In Life of Galileo, Brecht represents the Church as offering this kind of stability, but in a way that leads only to stagnation. The play demonstrates that conflict is essential in effecting change for the better.

Discussion questions

- What does Life of Galileo reveal about conflict and change?
- Traditions and customs are merely instruments of oppression, designed to deter conflict. Do you agree?
- Conflicts within the community can always be traced back to conflicts between individuals. Do you agree?

Sample passage analysis

This section shows you how to identify Context ideas in a sample passage from Life of Galileo. First, re-read the passage in Scene 14, on pp.107–9, from:

ANDREA loudly: Science makes only one demand: contribution to science.

She moves on and puts the dish on the table.

Summary

Several years after the Inquisition, Andrea visits Galileo on his way to Holland. Andrea is elated to discover that Galileo has made a secret copy of the Discorsi and he decides that Galileo’s recantation was a strategy to gain time to complete his work; however, Galileo insists that it was simply cowardice.
The discussion that follows encapsulates some of the key issues in the play. Virginia, although only appearing at the end of the passage, is a watchful presence in the scene, ensuring that Galileo continues to toe the line.

Questions for exploring ideas

- What does Andrea’s eagerness to condone Galileo’s recantation in this scene reveal about their personal relationship and Andrea’s values?
- What does Galileo’s language in the lines ‘And I met it ... death-fearing community’ reveal about his attitude to science and scientists? How would you account for his views?
- How does Galileo believe that he is going to be judged by the world of science?
- What differences does Galileo consider that scientific discovery has made to people’s lives? In what ways does he see these as beneficial or as detrimental?
- What questions does Galileo raise about the role of scientists in a world dominated by greed and superstition?
- Why does Galileo believe that he should have ‘stood firm’ against the Inquisition?
- What is revealed about Galileo’s situation by Virginia’s actions and comment in this passage?
- What does Galileo’s condemnation of himself as a traitor to his profession reveal about his moral values and scientific principles?
Activities

- Compare the passage above with earlier passages which portray Galileo as a passionate and idealistic scientist. How have his views changed as a result of the conflict between himself and the Church?
- Make a list of different characters’ responses to the conflict between science and religion, commenting on the reasons for the views they hold.
- Role-play characters with differing points of view (for example, the Procurator and Federzoni), arguing for or against this proposition: ‘Science is only worthwhile if it improves the lives of human beings.’
- Conduct a debate on whether or not Galileo’s decision to recant was, in the end, good or bad for science.

Focus on text features

As well as drawing on ideas from *Life of Galileo* in your writing about *Encountering Conflict*, you can base the language and style of your writing on the structures and features of the play. For example, the following features of Brecht’s text may influence how you choose to use language in the texts you create:

- Powerful dialogue explores the central issues and ideas.
- The protagonist (Galileo) often carries the moral voice of the text, and it is with him – despite (or perhaps because of) his flaws – that reader/audience sympathy lies.
- The clash of binary oppositions, embedded in the characters, reflects the wider conflicts. For example: Barberini/Pope Urban VIII represents the state, and Galileo represents the individual.
- Brecht makes subtle use of clothing and food imagery to extend our understanding of character.
Points of view on the Context

These discussion/writing questions and activities are designed to encourage you to consider some of the questions raised by the Context Encountering Conflict in *Life of Galileo* and to develop your own points of view on the key ideas.

For further discussion/writing

- *Life of Galileo* was written in a context of political corruption and abuse of power in the 20th century. It drew on an even earlier conflict from the 17th century. Yet today the play seems just as relevant to a modern audience. Do you agree? Why or why not?

- Balancing the interests of society and the individual is often difficult. Brecht suggests, however, that the long-term interests of the state might be well served by the freedom of the individual. How does Brecht convey this viewpoint? To what extent do you agree with it?

- Galileo confesses that his manuscript of the *Discorsi* is a reflection of his ‘vanity’ (p.105). To what extent would you agree that all scientific research is based on vanity?

- In a conflict between reason and superstition, superstition will always win. Do you agree?

- The women in the text are mostly sinful, superstitious, silent and/or unintelligent. Why do you think Brecht constructed his female characters in this way? What is suggested about the society in which these women lived?

Activities

- In small groups, locate evidence in the play to suggest that Galileo has no hope of succeeding in his endeavour to have his theories accepted.
• Construct a colour-coded mind map of the characters on the side of science and the characters on the side of religion. Find quotations and textual details that ‘justify’ the stance of each group of characters. Give them a ‘star’ rating indicating their power in society, and an emoticon (such as 😊) indicating their morality rating.

• Explore the roles of Mrs Sarti, Virginia, Sagredo, Ludovico, Federzoni, Filippo Mucius and Mr Gaffone. How do they add to our understanding of conflict in the play? Why are they involved in the conflict and what does each of them have to gain or lose?

• Debate the proposition that Galileo’s hands are ‘better stained than empty’ (p.106).

• Can you think of any more recent conflicts between religion and science that resemble the conflicts in Italy in the 17th century?

Reference


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About the author

Sue Sherman, BA, Dip.Ed., Post-Grad.Dip., taught VCE English, Literature and IB Language A1 at MLC in Melbourne. She has worked as Education Officer at VATE and served on the Curriculum Committee, the Literature Examination setting panel and the Literature Text Selection panel. Sue has also been an external assessor for VCE English and Literature. She has contributed to resources for educational publishers including Insight, VATE and Cambridge University Press, and been a presenter at VATE student revision days and teacher workshops. Sue is currently working as an Educational Consultant and teaching at Loreto, Mandeville Hall.